

Her Tattoos Make a Psyche Difference

Peninsula Resident Uses Special Talent to Restore Soldiers' Self-Images

by Betty Lukas

Laura Albano "loves" her work.

That particularly generous description applies to lots of people who enjoy their work, but for Albano, the word "love" produces an entirely different meaning because of what she does with her talent.

For, in addition to her work as a cosmetic tattoo artist—think new eyebrows and lip lining—Albano is affiliated with UCLA's "Operation Mend" program, where she applies the appropriate pigment to service personnel who have been burned and scarred in car bombings or suffered other facial and body devastations in wartime.

The vivacious Peninsula native, who's been part of the UCLA Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery for the past four years, now brings her particular and precise tattoo skills and her genius with pigmentation to wounded military personnel who have been sent there — in a nearly new collaborative pilot program — from Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas.

"They often have undergone a whole year of reconstruction before they see me," she explained. "I'm always the last person a patient sees — after all the others are done. It's very emotional for them, because they feel whole again."

"I have the greatest job in the world," she said of the patients she works with. "I help them become complete again. I'm so grateful I have a skill set that can help," and then adds soberly, "but some of these kids, there's nothing I can do for them."

She brings out an album and points to a photo of serviceman Sal Trujillo. "I gave him a new eyebrow, which had been burned off, plus dots under his eyes—no liner for a man—plus tiny tattoo dots on the back of his shaved head which filled empty spaces left by the long periods of time he had spent in bed," she explained. "All of my work is done by hand—precisely and with particular attention paid to make sure the color matches. It's all about pigmentation. It's all about the right color."

And just how did this connection occur? Tennis turned out to be the catalyst. Still the avid tennis player, Albano said she and Dr. Timothy Miller, professor and chief of the UCLA Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, met on the courts. "Dr. Miller and I played tennis on several occasions, and we spoke about how my skills might benefit reconstructive patients. That is how it all began in 2003 when Dr. Miller asked me to join his staff." And it was in 2008 that he asked her to become part of the "Operation Mend" program.

According to Dr. Miller, "She is a very valuable individual, particularly in our 'Operation Mend' effort."

"If there is a white scar, for example," he explained, "she often tattoos the white scar so that it matches the adjacent normal skin." And then he added, "She is an extremely conscientious and likeable individual whose work is superb."

This particular eye for just the right color that Miller mentioned, also finds her in great demand as one who specializes in breast areola tattooing following breast cancer surgery.

Such disparate patients are the beneficiaries of Albano's tattooing skills, and she has proof to demonstrate it when she brings out yet another album that contains before-and-after photos of women who

have undergone breast replacement surgery. It is Albano who carefully, with special attention to pigment, restores natural color to the areola, she explained during a recent interview in her Hollywood Riviera office.

Dr. James Black and his three associates in Torrance specialize in breast reconstruction, and it was through Black's position on the faculty at UCLA that "he found me." Albano said she's been performing areola pigmentation procedures for his entire group for the past four years. She's also associated with Cedars Sinai Medical Group to provide patients with medical tattoo services, "primarily areola pigmentation," she noted.

How did Laura Albano acquire this gift of artistic precision? "Well, for one thing, my grandfather as a hobby used to pour molten lead into little soldier molds, and when he was done and they were dry and they were removed from the mold, I'd paint them in colors that matched their particular uniforms," she explained, smiling at the recollection. "I really liked that. I also did a lot of painting and drawing when I was a child."

Yet how could she know what opportunities for service lay ahead when this youngest of four children was born in 1964 to schoolteachers Mary and Peter Albano? A lifetime resident of Miraleste, a graduate of Peninsula schools and an all-around athlete all those years, Albano managed to snag a four-year tennis scholarship to Brigham Young University-Hawaii. "My father loved tennis and I just followed in his footsteps," she explained.

"I had so much fun in college that I kept changing my major," she laughed, "because the BYU campus in Hawaii is across from the beach." She finally graduated in 1988 with a bachelor's degree in business management. "At the time I thought I might study law, because you can do so many things with a law degree." Of course her parents approved.

But her enthusiasm for that career didn't last, and while waiting to decide what to do with her life, she said she taught tennis and worked



Medical tattoo artist Laura Albano applying dark color to patient's head to cover surgery scars. Photo by David Fairchild.



Medical tattoo artist Laura Albano with serviceman Sal Trujillo, one of her patients at UCLA's "Operation Mend."

at a variety of jobs.

She said a friend finally turned her in the direction of permanent tattooing, "much to my parents' chagrin," she said a bit ruefully. "The thing I liked about it was the immediate gratification."

"But it's a difficult business to start. I worked at different hair salons for five years to make ends meet. All the while I was taking lots of classes, many were with individual tutors and many were specialized classes, like areola pigmentation and scar camouflage."

The more she thought about her work, the more she realized other motives were afoot. "I love precision, and I love working with my hands," she explained. "I also saw the practical benefits with regard to those I helped."

"But the most important reason, I think, is that I've always wanted to have as much control over my own destiny as possible... and I felt that if I pursued a career in law, my life would not be my own. Now I have complete freedom and flexibility with my schedule so that when I want to travel, or whatever it is I might want to do, I can do it."

"I have been fortunate enough," she went on, "to create for myself the exact life I have wanted, an amazingly fulfilling career that hopefully impacts peoples' lives, a very flexible schedule that enables me to travel the world and lots of free time to spend with Mattie [her dog] and all of the people who are important to me."

Yet it wasn't until 1998 that she was able to open her own office. At the moment, she said that 70 percent of her work is devoted to cosmetic tattoos, "but the ratio is changing every year," she acknowledged, adding that "there's lots of satisfaction at the cosmetic level."

Albano's success, as she pointed out, has allowed her to travel extensively, which includes annual trips to Bellagio on Lake Como in Italy. She also said that "Mount Everest and Mount Kilimanjaro are high on my to-do list for hiking."

And then there's her other interest in rescue dogs. "I want to rescue the ones no one wants. They have such gratitude—and you can just see it," she said with her usual sensitivity. Her own Mattie, a Bichon/Maltese mix, is a rescue dog and her constant companion, even when she works out five days a week and even when she works at "Operation Mend." And even when she settles in for a month at Bellagio "where everyone knows us."

But at the moment, she's pondering a possible trip to the United Arab Emirates.

"Would you believe someone from there wants me to work on his 21-year-old brother?" she said, showing a just-arrived e-mail to her visitor: "As I have seen your achievements on your website..." it reads in part as he solicits her assistance. The writer also included photos of a young man whose face is marred by scars and discoloration.

No question about it: He looks like a perfect candidate for Laura Albano's magic touch. **PEN**

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